

STATEMENT OF REP. JOHN CONYERS, JR.

Media Forum

May 24, 2005

There are few institutions in our nation today that are capable of operating as a check on the abuses of one party rule – one is the filibuster; another is an independent judiciary; a third is a free and unbiased press. All three of these institutions are under assault today.

Last night the Republicans came within an inch of obliterating more than two centuries of precedent supporting the minority's right of debate. The triggering of the "nuclear option" may have been delayed for the time being; but the message has been clearly delivered by the Majority – in the future, you exercise your rights at your own peril.

Anyone who witnessed the shameful Terri Schiavo debate knows that the Judiciary is under attack in this country. With Tom DeLay threatening to "hold judges accountable" and Senator Cornyn rationalizing violence against what he calls unaccountable judges, there can be little doubt the Congressional Majority can and will use their authority to discipline judges who stand in the way of their extreme right wing agenda.

As for freedom of the press – the subject of today's forum – all you need to do is turn on the television, open up the paper, or listen to the radio to appreciate the extent our so-called "fourth estate" has fallen. The vast majority of the mainstream media is not only unwilling to accurately report on the failings of the Administration, but the few who do have fallen victim to scapegoating and retribution.

We have turned from breaking stories like Watergate and the Iran-Contra scandal to celebrity journalism. As the Congressional Research Report I am releasing today proves, major events that shape our democracy and impact our lives routinely receive scant and belated coverage, while the most trivial matters that were once the last stories on "Inside Edition" or "A Current Affair" now dominate the airwaves.

In the lead up to the Iraq war, every minor leak supporting the Administration's contention that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction was trumpeted on page one. Stories challenging these assertions and discussing the final reports of weapons inspectors concluding there were no such weapons, however, were banished to a few paragraphs in the middle of dailies. Such incidents have become the rule not the exception during the Bush Administration, particularly after 9/11, and in the face of a massive consolidation in media ownership.

Can you imagine the media uproar ten years ago if the Clinton White House had given a fake journalist operating under a fake name unlimited access to the White House? Does anyone think for a minute that the *Washington Times* would have ignored stories about paid propaganda coming out of the Clinton Education Department, or if a Democratic Secretary of State had turned tens of thousands of Republicans away at the polls in a critical swing state?

Would most of the major papers have buried stories detailing secret agreements to invade Iraq, billions of dollars in missing reconstruction funds, or fantasy war stories spun by the Defense Department if a Democrat were responsible? Consider what Bob Novak or Bill O'Reilly would have said if Mike McCurry had browbeat them about their use of anonymous sources, or the Secretary of Defense had warned the press to "be careful what you say" as Donald Rumsfeld had done. You know the answer as well as I do.

There are a few alternative sources willing to speak truth to power. I first learned about the now infamous "Downing Street Memo" on Daily Kos. Bradblog, Raw Story and Air America have been at the forefront of our ongoing national election scandal. But these voices are too few and too diffuse to overcome the blatant biases of our cable channels and the negligence and neglect of our major newspapers.

Thomas Jefferson wrote "our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost." Let me remind

those in the media, by failing to exercise your rights and duties to challenge authority, you risk losing not only your integrity, but the nation's trust and respect. And to those in the Administration who would blame the press for their misdeeds and the media for their failings, I would ask you to "be careful what you say." You cannot preach democracy abroad if you don't respect the Constitution and freedom of the press in our own country.